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Learning from the Daniloff case

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Regardless of how ugly the present confrontation between Washington and Moscow may be, it can offer useful lessons for better management of U.S.-Soviet relations in the future.

Developments surrounding accused Soviet spy Gennady Zakharov and American journalist Nicholas Daniloff, held in Moscow after being framed, demonstrate, first, the overdue need for much clearer rules for handling shadowy areas of superpower relations. Talking about more ambitious plans—including arms control agreements—without this is putting the cart before the horse.

Meanwhile, both sides should get used to pondering alternatives in their policy, and in that of the adversary, in much broader terms, in order to prevent possible misunderstandings and subsequent confrontations.

The frame-up of Daniloff vividly illustrates bad judgment and short temper in Moscow. Instead of keeping their options open and trying to handle the case of Zakharov in the broader context of ongoing negotiations with the United States, the Soviets opted for a reckless confrontation, thereby losing some available opportunities.

By having Zakharov arrested, President Reagan had the door wide open to the game he likes most: having it both ways. He could have demonstrated anew that, summit or no summit, he was hard on the Soviets. Or he would have been able to show additional flexibility in summit preparation and could have eventually helped to settle Zakharov's case.

The Soviets would have been in a much better situation, too: They could have put additional pressure on Washington by asking the U.S. to prove by concrete deeds that Zakharov's arrest was not a display of Washington's intransigence. In case Moscow felt later that the U.S. was not flexible, either about Zakharov or at presummit talks, or both, it still would have had plenty of time to think about other, better options.

Wrong assumptions and political insensitivity constitute the main reason the Soviets got into trouble with Zakharov in the first place.

In view of its critical failures in recent months, the KGB was more than reckless by taking for granted the expected success of Zakharov's ongoing operation in New York. Prudence should have dictated more caution, not less, at a time when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was trying to arrange a productive summit with President Reagan.

Nobody besides Moscow questions the merit of the case U.S. authorities have against Zakharov. Supporters of a fast crackdown on him in the U.S. government could have reasoned that there was no need to worry excessively about the potential impact of this case on the meeting between Secretary of State George Shultz and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. By choosing the questionable timing for Zakharov's rules-breaking move, it is the Soviets who have displayed disregard for political calculations.

Even the worst-case scenario of possible Soviet reaction did not seem to be exceptionally bothersome. KGB options might have been considered as relatively insignificant, especially if the U.S. side did not have anybody without diplomatic immunity in Moscow engaged in intelligence-gathering.

And yet, when the ball fell unexpectedly into its court, Moscow overreacted anyhow, harming itself—even if it still probably does not realize it. But the Soviets have managed to make life difficult for the administration as well.

Obviously, there must have been a strong temptation in the KGB "to do something." The KGB has suffered heavy losses in its game with the United States—not a welcome development when Gorbachev is campaigning to improve effectiveness everywhere.

Contrary to some other expectations, Gorbachev himself seems to have been in an equally belligerent mood. Thus was the stage set for the frame-up of an American in the USSR.

The main question since has been whether the KGB felt it possible to prepare a defensible case against somebody it has had under surveillance. The agency obviously had in mind a set of accusations that, though not necessarily defensible by Western standards, nevertheless would be applicable in the much more restrictive, paranoia-dominated Soviet system. The choice fell on Daniloff.

By its untimely and provocative action, Moscow has put before President Reagan some clear-cut and unpleasant choices. Faced with the domestic cry for the freedom of Daniloff and at the same time by the Soviet intransigence, the President eventually accepted some a tradeoff that nobody in America likes. [He is portrayed as soft on Moscow, because the cases of Zakharov and Daniloff are obviously not comparable.]

Mikhail Gorbachev

It is another sign of Moscow's shortsightedness not to realize that this development eventually will narrow Reagan's room for maneuver in summit preparations, and in the summit itself. So while Soviet politicians may enjoy their victory in the first round of the tradeoff game, they would do well to remember that for the settlement of the present situation and for the summit itself, the American President has only one goodwill account open. The moment the Soviets wake up to this reality, they will feel the chill.

It would not be surprising, therefore, if they at some point changed their tune and displayed much more flexibility in the final stage of the present confrontation. Such a change on their part is overdue.

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